



National Aboriginal Women's Summit – *Strong Women, Strong Communities*

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Issue Paper Theme: Language and Culture

Topic: Language and Culture in Approaches to Programming

ISSUE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INUIT

RISKS

Canada is a diverse nation with citizens whose cultures and languages represent the entire planet. Among Canada's Aboriginal peoples, the diversity is also very rich. Sadly, ancient cultural practices and languages have fallen victim to forced colonialization of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

In Canada's North, the Inuit of this country speak dialects of the language known as Inuktitut. The dialects vary across the communities that make up the areas where Inuit have traditionally and continue to reside. European contact with Inuit was relatively late in comparison to that of First Nations in the South. Due to this, Inuktitut has fared better as a language than its First Nations counterparts. However, this is not the case in all of the four Inuit regions. Despite the fact that Inuktitut is the first language of most Nunavummiut (residents of Nunavut Territory) and Nunavik (northern Québec), this is not the case for the Inuit of Nunatsiavut region (Labrador) and the Inuvialuit region of the western Arctic (Northwest Territories). Because of this, Inuktitut is officially listed as an endangered language. This means that without intervention, the language will be lost to upcoming generations of Inuit. Language and culture are inexorably linked. When a language is threatened, so is the culture with which it is connected.

The cultural traditions of Inuit are unique and stem from a nomadic lifestyle of hunting and gathering throughout the circumpolar world. Hunting methods, food sources and preparation, shelter, clothing, theology, story-telling, means of travel, to name but a few were adapted to the harsh lifestyle, climate and geography of Canada's North. Today, not only do we witness the disappearance of such cultural practices, we also see a misappropriation of the Inuit practices by mainstream culture and the consumer economy. One has only to look at a kayak (qajjaq) or the Inukshuk to see how commonplace this has become.

Inuit today face a number of serious challenges to their well-being as a culture, but also as individual Canadians. Communities are plagued by sub-standard housing, poor birthing outcomes, shorter life expectancy, domestic violence, sexual abuse, among others. Loss of culture is repeatedly cited as being the major factor in the struggles facing Inuit.

“For the Inuit, high levels of abuse and violence also have roots in a loss of culture and social continuity, as well as, for many, feelings of a loss of control over the present and hopelessness about the future.

Rapid social and economic change combined with culturally insensitive approaches to the North has eroded Inuit values, customs and ways of living together.

Within a generation, as a result of rapid changes in lifestyle and the economic base in communities, as well as imposition of non-Inuit structures and values, Inuit have lost control of their destiny. Thus, high rates of change, harsh assimilation policies and the introduction of residential schools contributed to loss of culture and tradition.” (National Strategy to Prevent Abuse in Inuit Communities, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada)

WHAT IS PAUKTUUTIT DOING ABOUT IT?

Language and culture figure prominently in every program Pauktuutit delivers, from policy development and planning to evaluation and reporting. Pauktuutit leads the way in delivering culturally appropriate means of improving the lives of Inuit communities with, for example:

- On-the-land initiatives
- Translated materials
- Interpretation services at Pauktuutit events
- Community feasts featuring country foods
- Preservation of Inuit traditional clothing; the Amautiq project (Intellectual Property Rights)
- Inuit Midwifery
- National Strategy to Prevent Abuse in Inuit Communities

Recommendations

- Special programs and services for the small number of Inuit Elders, to ensure the continuity of their unique cultural contributions;
- National, consistent tracking and surveillance for enhanced data to better inform cultural policy;
- More National financial support for enhanced programming regarding language and culture;
- More holistic approaches to cultural policy development and collaboration between government departments and levels of government;
- National support for community-based strengthening of education programs for Inuit of all ages;

- Community/regional cultural service organizations should be strengthened in the North to support literacy programs.